10-2010

Male Aggression and Female Peace-making: A Review of Malcolm Potts and Thomas Hayden, Sex and War: How Biology Explains Warfare and Terrorism and Offers a Path to a Safer World

Katherine A. VALENTINE
Singapore Management University, kvalentine.2010@phdps.smu.edu.sg

Sharon KOH
Singapore Management University

Norman P. LI
Singapore Management University, normanli@smu.edu.sg

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/147470491000800409

Evolutionary Psychology

www.epjournal.net – 2010. 8(4): 677-681

Book Review

Male Aggression and Female Peace-Making

A review of Malcolm Potts and Thomas Hayden, *Sex and War: How Biology Explains Warfare and Terrorism and Offers a Path to a Safer World*. Benbella Books: Dallas, TX, 2008, 457 pp., US$24.95, ISBN 978-1933771571 (hardcover).

Katherine A. Valentine, School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University, Singapore. Email: kvalentine.2010@phdps.smu.edu.sg (Corresponding author).

Sharon Koh, School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University, Singapore.

Norman P. Li, School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University, Singapore.

Malcolm Potts, an obstetrician by training, became fascinated with the topic of human violence following his own first-hand experiences with the very worst of it – in particular, the treating of victims of mass rape that occurred during the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. In *Sex and War*, Potts and Thomas Hayden, a freelance science, medicine, and culture journalist, present a firsthand account of war through a scientific lens. This comprehensive volume argues that humans raping, torturing, and killing other humans reflects an innate male predisposition, and provides evidence to support this claim from fields as diverse as biology, political science, sociology, history, archeology, medicine, and evolutionary psychology. While it is sometimes difficult to read the brutal accounts of extreme violence, these occurrences have nevertheless been repeatedly observed and require explanation. The authors cover these topics in a straightforward, factual manner, but with the compassion from having seen the effects of war on a population. They offer both evolutionary explanations for the existence of war and potential ways to prevent its occurrence: "…while evolution has linked sex and violence over millions of years, civilization has given us the tools to separate the two again, and this opens a pathway toward making the world a better place" (p. 3). The book is accessible, intriguing, and an important contribution to the existing literature on how evolved adaptations affect modern life.

The first part of the book provides a theoretical framework by outlining the basic ideas of intrasexual competition and the role of both genes and the environment in shaping behavior and how this all relates to violence between species and within a species (chapters 1 and 2). The book delves into the behavior of our closest genetic relatives – chimpanzees (chapter 3) who, like humans, engage in violence both within their own groups and through

team-based aggression against out-group members. The biological basis for specific violent behaviors is then examined, including why it is that humans are willing to risk life and limb in combat (chapter 4). Here, we come to see how military organizations capitalize on "an innate capacity to treat our fellow humans with either great compassion or cold disregard, depending on whether we've assigned them to ingroup or out" (p. 70).

Women are addressed in-depth for the first time in chapter 6, wherein Martha Campbell contributes partial authorship. War and terrorism have often involved the control of women. The authors argue that countries that engage women in politics are more peaceful, whereas societies in which women's energies are only allowed to be funneled into childbearing and rearing are more violent. The authors then offer an insightful look at the evolution of the battle of the sexes, beginning with the behaviors of bonobos and chimpanzees.

Chapters 7 through 11 establish the natural origin of modern violent conflict in the small-scale inter-village raid. However, modern technological developments and population growth have led to large-scale fighting with ever more disastrous results. The authors highlight how many seemingly illogical decisions made by human leaders can be traced to the Stone Age mentalities of dehumanizing the out-group and over-reacting to potential threats: "Overestimating an adversarial threat may have provided an important safety margin during the Stone Age, but it can seriously mislead us in our decision-making today. It can stir the emotions of the professional intelligence services and elected leaders as readily as those of a farm boy or stockbroker volunteering to fight. Prior to the invasion of Iraq, the CIA consistently and uncritically accepted misleading data on the weapons of mass destruction Saddam Hussein was thought to control" (p. 170). This idea that Stone Age mentalities detrimentally affect the modern world is reiterated in Chapter 15, which discusses recent conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, and Darfur. The authors emphasize that humans, or at least human males, have the ability and sometimes the inclination to inflict pain, and even death, on other human beings.

Chapter 12 discusses the future of warfare if things continue the way they have gone before. It highlights how each new technology that has been developed is used in some way to create a better weapon with which to kill other humans. While "wars may come wrapped in a veneer of religion or political philosophy… the battle for resources is usually just below the surface" (p. 293). Team aggression in both humans and chimpanzees, the authors argue, is ultimately about resources and, if "left unchecked, all living things can reproduce faster than the environment can sustain" (p. 299). One striking example of this phenomenon:

> Edward Miguel of the University of California, Berkeley, and colleagues Shanker Satyanath and Ernest Sergenti of New York University compared rainfall levels and incidents of civil conflict across the African continent, and found that as one increased, the other declined, with a statistical certainty of 95 percent. Interestingly, the effect was found across many different cultures and irrespective of whether the country was well or poorly governed. (p. 294).

The authors further argue that it is particularly when there is a large portion of younger compared to older men that conflict arises, and that resource wars will become increasingly common.

This book not only delves into the deepest recesses of human behavior to explain warfare and terrorism, but also provides hope in the prevention of these deadly endeavors. The quote displayed at the beginning of the very first chapter, taken from *The African Queen*, is indicative of the authors' feelings towards our less attractive human dispositions: "Nature, Mr. Allnutt, is what we were put on this earth to rise above" (p. 1). Indeed, this sentiment is reiterated several times throughout the book, and the mechanics of how peace might be achieved are detailed in the final chapters. Women, the authors argue, have a key role to play in the establishment of peace. Historically, women have been controlled by men, particularly in the realms of sex and sexuality. It is unclear when this began, but the agricultural revolution likely made it more important to ensure paternity because of the passing on of property and wealth from generation to generation. Taken to the extreme, women are sometimes viewed as property: "In Africa today, women make up half the population, do two-thirds of the work, receive one-tenth of the gross income, and own one-hundredth of the property... Women and cows belong to men" (p. 302). The authors point out that culture and religion have played a large part in the portrayal of female sexuality as a dangerous entity to be controlled, and support their claims with data throughout the ages. They argue that empowering women is a way to temper the worst aspects of men's inclinations towards team aggression, territoriality, and violence.

Easy access to family planning is set up as a key step towards empowerment. Granted, as the first medical director of the International Planned Parenthood Federation in 1968, author Malcolm Potts may be positively biased in this regard. His projections for population growth sometimes seem a bit high considering the incidences of natural disaster, disease, and of course war that temper such growth. Regardless, his main points are still valid and well-supported: 1) There is a strong relationship between poverty and high birth rate; 2) When women have affordable access to family planning, average family size decreases; 3) Population growth eventually leads to a larger number of unemployed young men; 4) A large proportion of unemployed young men in a population usually leads to violent outbursts of one sort or another; 5) Larger global and local populations put more of a strain on natural resources, which can lead to resource wars. These factors suggest that giving women the ability to voluntarily decrease the number of children they have could help reduce conflicts worldwide.

The authors also suggest that women could contribute to "waging peace" through a broader equality with men that would allow women to contribute their less bellicose views in government and policy-making. While the evolution of female peacefulness is not as fully explored in this book as the male inclination towards violence, the authors provide evidence to suggest women are less likely to engage in team aggression or murder. However, this does not mean that women would necessarily be any less supportive of war. Female leaders are subject to the same pressures as male leaders. Margaret Thatcher, for example, would not be cited as a docile peace-wager. She supported the Falklands War (Norpoth, 1987), took a hardline stance against the hunger strikes in Northern Ireland (Murray, 2006), and approved a plan to modernize Britain's nuclear capabilities by

replacing Polaris with a new generation of Trident submarines at a cost of 10 billion pounds (Youngs and Taylor, 2005). Thatcher may be the exception rather than the rule, but it is not inconceivable that women, under the same pressures as men in power, might make the same decisions.

Additionally, the authors recommend a free media, the avoidance of supplying weaponry to possible enemies, education for everyone in a secular environment, including the teaching of science and evolution, and a more logical, less Stone Age approach to wartime decision-making. Scientific knowledge is praised as a key source of peace-generating information such as sustainable energy sources, improved health, sustainable agricultural practices, ocean-management, reforestation, and the overall pursuit of scientific thought over religious fanaticism. While these would all be positive developments, more analysis is needed to identify the actual steps needed to prevent or reduce large-scale aggression. Human beings are ill-adapted to consider billions of other individuals when in the Environment of Evolutionary Adaptedness they would only have interacted with a limited set of people (who would often be at least somewhat related to them). For humans to overcome natural distinctions between "us" and "them," more research is clearly needed.

Another point that deserves further inquiry relates to there being two species of chimpanzees – *Pan troglodytes* (subsequently referred to as "chimpanzees" or "chimps") and *Pan paniscus* ("bonobos"), to which "humans are so similar that we might be considered a third"(p. 41). However, bonobos are all together less aggressive than chimps, and are not known to display team aggression. The authors only make a casual detour to examine bonobo behavior in this book, attributing their lack of aggression to the possibility that "it never evolved or had been lost… because it wouldn't provide any benefit" (p. 128). The question of why chimps, and not bonobos, are fingered as the "missing link" in our understanding of human violence could benefit from further consideration. However, if we are to fully understand how biology can "help us understand why we do certain things both constructive and harmful" (p. 61), then an in-depth examination of the behavior of *both* species of chimpanzee may be required.

On the whole, this book is insightful, engaging, and well-researched. It offers 554 references for the reader to pursue further readings. The footnotes are actually as interesting as the main text. It does a good job of balancing a factual look at a global problem with a human touch. Indeed, a primary strength of this book lies in its stories, which the authors skillfully use to piece together a well-articulated volume on applied evolutionary psychology. Anecdotes from Potts' experiences as an obstetrician in war-torn countries throughout the world add a concrete element to the narrative that draws the reader in. This book is not a scholarly review of laboratory experiments or a statistical analysis of historical data sets. This book is about real life and it provides a compelling analysis of the kinds of stories seen in the news, alongside more personal stories revealed by the authors. The people and situations that the authors carefully nuance and describe in detail will likely stay with a reader long after the book is finished. From the personal story of a mother, surrounded by riots and warring in Bangladesh, unable to face the body of her raped daughter out of shame; to the story of the introduction of volunteer women to the ruthless Black September group (launched by the Palestinian Liberation Organization) whose militants were offered a reward of "$3000, an apartment, a gas stove, a TV, and long-term

employment" (p.120) for marriage; to the lessons learnt from years of observing troops of male chimpanzees conducting border patrols in the Gombe Stream National Park in Tanzania; to the frozen 5000-year old corpse of "Otzi" with a dagger in his hand and a flint arrowhead lodged in his left shoulder blade. Each story illustrates an important point about the evolutionary roots of war and aggression that is then woven together to provide an impactful look at the inescapable relationship between sex and war. It is a fascinating read that will add insight to issues that are important not only for the public, but also for those within academia.

References

Murray, D. (2006, May 5). Hunger strikes: 25 years on. *BBC News*. Retrieved from: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/northern_ireland/4976048.stm

Norpoth, H. (1987). Guns and butter and government popularity in Britain. *American Political Science Review*, *81*, 949-959.

Youngs, T., and Taylor, C. (2005, July 5). Trident and the future of the British nuclear deterrent. *House of Commons Library*. Retrieved from: http://www.acronym.org.uk/docs/0507/hoc_library.pdf